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 TAGS: [BY](#) [CH](#) [LY](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [RW](#) [SU](#)  
 SUBJECT: BURUNDI -- VIEWS OF A DEPARTING AMBASSADOR

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia N. Moller for reasons 1.4  
 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: After three years as Ambassador to Burundi, I am convinced that this small, poverty-stricken, conflict-ridden nation has the potential to fulfill its promise as a durable African success story. Despite the just-resolved 15-year civil conflict, lack of infrastructure, deep-rooted corruption and the desperate need for broad-based economic activity, Burundi has made measurable progress since 2005 national elections marked the end of fighting for all but one rebel group. Burundi still has far to go to secure its struggling democracy, institutionalize stability, vanquish corruption, ameliorate poverty and provide to its citizens health care, education, and human rights protections. With considerable donor support, however, it can continue to move forward.

12. (C) One of our most formidable tools for affecting GoB decisions is the Embassy's painstakingly established image as a uniquely honest broker, untainted by a colonial past, and willing to speak to all legitimate political actors. The Embassy is singularly poised to influence the Burundian government and encourage it to follow a democratic path. Burundi's location in the volatile and long-troubled Great Lakes region bounded by Eastern Congo and Rwanda makes it important that we use our influence to ensure stability in the region. Regional integration will be crucial both in securing peace and promoting economic development. If Burundi can hold a credible election -- acceptably free, fair, transparent and peaceful -- in 2010 and complete an orderly installation of the newly-elected government, we will have made a worthwhile investment in this still-fragile democracy. END SUMMARY.

2010 Elections as Tipping Point

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13. (SBU) Burundi today may well be at a tipping point. Although political manipulation, endemic corruption, human rights violations and criminal impunity still plague this poverty-stricken nation, the past three years have brought considerable cumulative progress. If free, fair, transparent and peaceful electoral processes, both in the run-up to 2010 national elections and their aftermath can be achieved, this will materially solidify the progress made since 2005

polling. With continued significant international support, successful elections will position Burundi for greater democratic, economic and social gains. But should a fair election process be, or be seen to be, hijacked by the ruling CNDD-FDD party, a potential for renewed violence remains in this country that has known too much of it. Further, if the election is badly flawed, there is a risk that international donors would decide that their scarce funds could be more successfully deployed elsewhere. To ensure that Burundi continues its forward momentum and contributes to greater regional stability, it is in U.S. interests to continue to cultivate our already-strong relationship with Bujumbura, and build on recent GoB successes.

From Rebels to Peacekeepers: Successes...

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14. (C) Most significantly, the 15-year civil conflict appears at last to have ended. The government and the hold-out rebel FNL are in the final stages of implementing their 2007 ceasefire agreement; disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) are well underway. The government has registered the erstwhile rebel group as a fully-fledged political party and former combatants have begun to assume governmental positions as provincial governors, ambassadors and cabinet advisors. Further, it appears that even if the criminal violence that sustained the FNL through its years in the bush continue, organized ideology-based FNL combat is genuinely over. Nevertheless, demobilized rebels -- or "demobilisee" -- who have spent up to 15 years on the run in the bush and who are consequently without education or vocational skills -- will return to villages and towns already virtually devoid of economic activity. There, they will vie for survival with the more than 450,000 recently repatriated refugees. These are the Burundians who, beginning in 1972, fled to Tanzania to escape the violence in Burundi. Making training and economic development opportunities available to both refugee returnees and demobilisee will be a key to sustaining the internal security of the country by ensuring these groups have the means to earn a peaceful living.

15. (C) Burundi has been our steadfast partner in pursuing critical regional objectives. When in 2007 the U.S. sought African troops to support AMISOM, the African Union's Mission in Somalia, Burundi was one of only two states to pledge its support and make good on that promise. With considerable U.S. planning, training, financial and equipment support, Burundi has to date supplied over 2500 troops who have risked their lives in Mogadishu. Burundian soldiers performed well when suicide bombers attacked their base in February 2009. Despite rather desultory calls from some political party leaders to bring Burundi's troops home, the President, fully backed by the military commanders, refused to do so. The Burundians are serious about developing their peacekeeping skills and becoming long-term participants in peacekeeping missions, particularly UN missions. Participation in PKOs burnishes Burundi's international credentials, provides vital expertise to Burundi's military forces, and, critically, provides a safety valve by furnishing legitimate work for thousands of demobilized rebels who populate Burundi's bloated military. Continued support will ensure a willing and steady supply of increasingly-skilled peacekeepers.

16. (SBU) Burundi has been an energetic and helpful partner in the U.S.-facilitated Tripartite Plus meetings, which successfully provided a forum for quarreling neighbors Uganda, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi to meet together under the aegis of U.S. engagement to discuss regional security issues and develop shared plans to address them. Further, Burundi has been a consistent and reliable ally at the UN. In fact Burundi has been one of Africa's most supportive countries, generally endorsing U.S. positions on issues such as Iran and some human rights topics.

...and Mixed Results

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17. (C) A number of Burundi's success stories, however, follow a two-steps-forward-one-step-back dance step. On balance, the movement is forward, but the process of getting there is often painful. A case in point is the dismissal from the National Assembly in 2008 of 22 defectors from the ruling CNDD-FDD. Although the decision to expel them was constitutionally questionable to say the least, the expulsion ended a yearlong legislative stalemate during which the 22 acted to obstruct any business whatsoever from going forward, and the National Assembly is once more able to function. In another instance, President Nkurunziza and the legislature recently garnered widespread criticism for having included in a revised penal code that otherwise had great merit and attracted positive comment, a provision that criminalized homosexual acts. Nkurunziza was likely trying to bolster his evangelical credentials and position his CNDD-FDD party on the moral high ground ahead of elections. But the 2009 Penal Code containing the excoriated homosexuality criminalization provision also criminalized torture, rape and trafficking in persons, long goals of Burundi's active civil society as well as of this Embassy.

18. (C) Additionally, after first attempting to appoint a biased slate to serve as the ostensibly independent National Election Commission (CENI), the government bowed to pressure both from Burundi's Senate and from a vocal and outraged international community to rename an independent Board. The new CENI, which is responsible for preparing for and conducting Burundi's national elections, is now working to revise the Electoral Code, recruit and train staff and begin educating the media and civil society on their roles in the upcoming polls. Strong and continued support for the CENI, civil society, a free and independent media, transparent processes and civic education will be crucial if Burundi is to avoid potential -- but by no means inevitable -- election-related violence.

#### Continuing Challenges

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19. (C) Despite its embryonic stability, critical challenges linger in this still-fragile state. Burundi remains one of the poorest countries in the world, beset by poverty, poor health and education systems, lacking basic infrastructure and sustaining only minimal economic activity -- primarily the subsistence agriculture on which 90 per cent of the population depend. Per-capita income is only \$138 per year. The sad legacy of inter-ethnic slaughter has most recently morphed into Hutu vs. Hutu conflict as factions vie for political supremacy. The moribund Truth and Reconciliation Commission, conceived to promote the healing process, is on indeterminate hiatus pending election outcomes (there are certainly those political leaders who hope that their former careers as rebel leaders will never be examined too closely).

While Burundians appear to have put overt Hutu-Tutsi struggles to the side for now, true reconciliation may take a generation. The return of some 450,000 refugees who fled the country's repeated conflicts threatens stability by exacerbating often deadly disputes over scarce land, and greatly overburdens the country's weak social services network. Land disputes remain a crucial flash point in the interior and our assistance projects dealing with land registration must certainly continue. An underpaid, under trained, rather brutal police force and lack of capacity and transparency in the judicial system has meant that in large part, perpetrators, even of serious crimes, are only rarely prosecuted successfully.

#### Influencing the GoB

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10. (C) Burundians have a tendency to compare their current economic and political condition to that of neighboring Rwanda, deeming (and rightly) that Rwanda is far and away the more advanced of the two. They credit Rwandan President Kagame's strong leadership and political savvy for the

disparity. Although President Nkurunziza has tried to emulate Kagame with his declarations of compulsory Saturday morning community service, free primary school, and free health care for children under five and pregnant women, he lacks the charismatic decisiveness and the informed political vision that characterize for Burundians his Kigali counterpart. A survivor of years on the lam in the bush, Nkurunziza has a certain streetwise survivor's savvy, but he has surrounded himself with a number of shadowy figures widely purported to be manipulating events to keep the ruling party in power. Their machinations are believed to include extortion, intimidation and even murder. Whether Nkurunziza himself is involved in illegal acts is unclear, but it certainly is plausible that some of his closest advisors, most particularly Security Services Chief Adolphe Nshirimana, condone the use of violence to achieve their political objectives. Nkurunziza appears not entirely in thrall to his Security Service Chief, however. Rather surprisingly, the President eagerly accepted our spring 2009 offer to have the FBI assist in the investigation of the murder of a prominent anti-corruption researcher -- a crime in which Nshirimana himself may well be implicated. Whether the GOB will cooperate fully in the FBI investigation as it uncovers more inconvenient evidence, remains to be seen. Unsurprisingly, security sector reform is particularly needed in Burundi.

¶11. (C) It has been possible for the international community to influence the Nkurunziza government. After activist journalist Alexis Sinduhije was detained on spurious charges of plotting against the security of the state and insulting the President, the diplomatic corps loudly expressed its outrage both individually and jointly. Although it took six months for the judicial wheels to grind, the outcome -- "not guilty" -- was widely celebrated. Few in Burundi doubt the positive outcome was directly influenced by the vigorous diplomatic corps lobbying. Embassy Bujumbura has been most effective in influencing GoB actions when our straightforward message has described likely U.S. reaction to a contemplated or completed course of action. With a few exceptions, we have delivered these messages privately, forcefully and in fairly blunt terms. Positioned as an honest broker willing to engage all legitimate political actors, this Embassy has unique credibility with the GoB and other opinion-makers. Without the burden of colonial paternalism borne by some of our European partners, and seen as advocates for peace, security, democracy and the well being of the people of this country, and bolstered by a burgeoning assistance budget, the Embassy is uniquely poised to influence Burundi's political class. Representational events at the CMR have proved particularly useful in providing cover for the leaders of ostensibly-feuding parties to meet, to discuss and to resolve thorny issues. In fact, representational events have proven one of our most effective techniques for pressing home U.S. objectives.

Burundi,s Future Rests in Regional Integration...

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¶12. (C) Burundi,s future lies in regional integration, particularly through its membership in the five-nation East African Community (EAC). While many observers focus on the economic implications of EAC membership, the political and social impacts will be equally important. The increasing prominence of regional issues may dilute the importance of the remaining Hutu-Tutsi divide. EAC members Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania may be far less reluctant to exert their influence if ill-considered GoB political decisions negatively affect outside perceptions of -- and investments into -- the shared region. Economically, despite Burundi,s own lack of natural resources, its proximity to neighboring DRC may well revive its role as a transit state, appealing to EAC businessmen and women hoping to exploit the minerals in that non-EAC state. A U.S. 2009 Treasury Department project to help Burundi,s Central Bank establish a financial market conforming to EAC standards is the kind of program that will accelerate Burundi,s lagging integration progress.

¶13. (SBU) Regional integration may also provide interesting opportunities for American businesses. With sufficient infrastructure, there is considerable tourism potential in this climate-blessed nation, centered primarily on Lake Tanganyika where a few ambitious resorts have already begun to take shape. For aquarium fanciers, Tanganyika also supplies the largest and most diverse population of cichlid species in the world. Although quality is inconsistent, Burundi produces what is widely held to be some of the highest quality specialty coffee in the world, and privatization of the industry, albeit fitful, has begun. High transport costs suggest that the fertile soils of Burundi could profitably support an industry to export dried herbs, spices and essential oils. Tea is another well-developed industry that would benefit from foreign interest and investment. Terrace farming -- scarcely seen despite fierce competition for productive land in this up-and-down mountainous countryside -- could provide some long-term relief for farmers, although the expense and labor to create them could prove prohibitive. The GoB has erected few barriers to foreign investment, although tax structure, corruption and government interference are burdensome for the few foreign firms operating here.

#### Promoting Broad-Based Economic Development

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¶14. (SBU) The 15-year crisis took a heavy toll on Burundi's economy. GNP dropped by half, foreign investment evaporated and productive infrastructure was largely abandoned or destroyed in the fighting. Burundi's human capital, including its entrepreneurs and intellectuals, fled to Europe, North America and neighboring countries. To recapture its pre-war status as a modestly successful exporter of agricultural items such as coffee and tea, the GoB needs to enact legislation that will assist private sector recovery and adopt policies that will promote a more competitive, less corrupt business environment. The Embassy has teamed with the World Bank to encourage these types of reforms. We have also noticed that the Diaspora has just begun to invest in Burundi, which may help to create a more favorable climate for home-grown entrepreneurs and persuade them to establish themselves in Burundi rather than venture abroad.

¶15. (SBU) Development of Burundi's economic potential will be neither an easy nor short-term undertaking. But given the potential and reasonably productive natural resource base and strategic location, and with the support of its international partners, prospects are good that economic activity will materially help stabilize the country in the medium term and produce wealth and investment in the longer term. Burundi will require continued engagement, encouragement and support from its partners, including the U.S., to reach its potential as a net contributor to EAC regional growth.

¶16. (SBU) One already-existing bright note: Burundi boasts a flourishing, 450 -strong association of women entrepreneurs (AFAB), who operate businesses as diverse as producing/bottling carbonated fruit juice (supported by an African Development Foundation grant), manufacturing furniture and ceramics, and cooperating to establish microfinance entities. The dynamic and energetic women of AFAB serve as business models in Burundi, and the organization should be a particularly good feeder group into the joint U.S.-Dutch Business Incubator project coming on line in late FY 2009. An embryonic handicraft collective could also prove successful in boosting employment and showcasing Burundian handwork. Again, the coffee, tea and sugar industries may provide opportunities for American firms and investors, particularly as, after significant U.S. prodding, the GoB makes progress on privatization pledges.

#### Supporting a Vibrant Civil Society

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¶17. (C) Finally, continued U.S. advocacy for human and civil rights will be crucial if Burundi's fragile democracy is to



take firm root. Strong financial and moral support from the U.S. and other donors has helped legitimize a vibrant civil society, and brave leaders calling for a voice and influence have challenged the GoB. Despite murder, harassment, intimidation and imprisonment, some organizations have come tantalizingly close to uncovering hard proof of corruption at high levels of the government, giving these groups legitimacy in the eyes of the general population. It has also given them new influence over political and judicial processes. The Presidency is consumed with establishing its own legitimacy in the eyes of Burundians and the international community on which it depends to finance much of its own existence. International support in all forms is holding the country together, and while it does so, we have a clear shot at helping to shape the path Burundi chooses. While the GoB chafes at some of the constraints imposed by the donor community -- it particularly would like the UN mission to go away -- the government recognizes that it must sometimes compromise.

¶18. (C) When the compromises prove too onerous, Burundi turns to less traditional donors, those who have a more relaxed attitude regarding the human rights/good governance strings that often accompany Western aid. Burundi has so far successfully solicited assistance from Sudan and Libya, and the Chinese are increasingly visible. The Chinese Embassy recently staged a ground-breaking ceremony for a 100-bed hospital, which included a promise of 30 Chinese healthcare professionals to staff it. These ostensibly no-strings projects understandably appeal to the GoB. We will need to evaluate how to treat growing Chinese and other non-traditional influence here.

#### In Conclusion

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¶19. (C) Burundi is a country with considerable potential. It has been a privilege for me to serve here. If we continue to help build and solidify the structures, institutions and processes of a strong democracy, Burundi can become a stable and durable success story. A free, responsible and independent media, a strong and independent judiciary, a professional police force that eschews impunity, a legislature willing to challenge the ruling party, and a vibrant civil society advocating for and protecting the rights of Burundi's citizens should be our long-term vision. Long-term broad-based economic and social development that creates opportunity for employment and wealth generation are possible here -- with time, determination, energy and luck -- and with a great deal of continuing, committed U.S. engagement.

Wagner